DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 113 FL 021 571

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TITLE Teaching Hebrew to Adults.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 10p.; Pages 9-10 (non-textual in content) have been deleted.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Ariel; n69 p4-13 1987

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Classroom Techniques; *Cultural Education; Educational History; *Hebrew; Higher Education; *Language Role; Religious Education; *Second Languages; Student Attitudes; Student Educational Objectives; Uncommonly Taught Languages

ABSTRACT

A history of the teaching of Hebrew to adults chronicles both the role of Hebrew as a unifying force among Jewish people around the world and efforts to improve the effectiveness of instruction. It is proposed that the rebirth of Hebrew has been due to substantial work, and contributed to the language's expansion from a holy to a literary and spoken language. "Ulpan" refers to Hebrew language instruction for children and adults alike, worldwide. Establishment of the state of Israel was a major factor in the growth of Hebrew instruction. Little is known about early efforts at instructional methods, but anecdotal evidence suggests that techniques used were practical and sometimes innovative. Organized effort appears to have begun in 1958, the tenth anniversary of the Israeli state, when senior instructors were sent to North America to awaken interest and encourage institutions. Currently, Hebrew instruction for adults is accomplished by two principal means: ulpan and college classes. Ulpan centers have been established in a number of countries. A major barrier to second language instruction, the cultural barrier, is generally not present in ulpan classes. Hebrew studies in higher education date back to the fifteenth century. (MSE)

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Teaching Hebrew to Adults

Ben-Zion Fischler

"(The children of) Israel were redeemed from Egypt on account of four things: Because they did not change their names, they did not change their language, they did not go tale-bearing, and none of them was found to have been immoral."

(Leviticus, Midrash Rabbah, Emor 32, 5)

Despite distances of time and place, the Hebrew language – the tongue of the prophets – remained the living language that linked Jewry the world over. The prominent part played by Hebrew in the establishment of the Jewish state is already recognized by historians. However, there were periods when, although the Hebrew language did not serve the day-to-day needs of the people, it was still used in written transactions and retained a prominent place in religious worship, prayer and festivals; in this way connecting scattered communities with each other and with their common past. It was thanks to this latent potential that the revivalists of Hebrew as a spoken language succeeded in their mission, despite sharp opposition from ultra-religious circles (who felt that the Holy Tongue should be reserved for sacred purposes) on the one hand, and the assimilationists on the other. This common basis, combined with tremendous dedication and zeal, made possible the rebirth of a language, where other nations had failed almost completely. Much has been written on this epic effort, and a great deal of research is still being devoted to it.

The Land of Israel had served as a meeting place in times of peace and war for many nations, cultures and languages, and there are numerous signs of their influence. Yet a balance was struck between

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foreign influences and indigenous Hebrew,* attested to in many instances as early as from the time of the Talmud. The use of the Hebrew language runs like a silver thread through the life of the Jewish people.

From the dispersion after the destruction of the Second Temple, through the entire Arab and Spanish period, from the German Diaspora to the Torah centres of Lithuania, Poland and the rest of eastern Europe, it was the Hebrew language – in addition to Jewish tradition, culture, laws, customs and heritage – that bound and unified the people exiled from Zion into a nation awaiting their return to their land.

Each period added to the existing foundation, absorbing new influences, giving new meanings to old words, thus enabling the holy tongue to become a literary language capable of encompassing topics far removed from the traditional and the religious ritual. Thus the synthesis of biblical and talmudic styles interwoven with coinages from liturgy and turns of phrase from the period of Jewish emancipation in the nineteenth century produced the base which, at the turn of the twentieth century, enabled Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and his disciples to succeed in the mission of reviving Hebrew as a spoken language.

Israel, being a country of immigration that doubled its Jewish population during the first years of its establishment (1948–1951), was impelled to find an expeditious way of teaching the language of the new nation to adults in order to transform them into citizens with equal rights, full partners in the state-building effort. Immigrant children were absorbed without particular problems in the existing school network. In absorption centres, transit camps and development towns where the immigrant children formed an absolute majority, the problems were solved by adjusting the tempo of studies and by introducing modifications in the syllabus and its level.

For adults, intensive courses in classes named *ulpanim*, especially designed to facilitate study and to dispense with the traditional time-

* "There are four languages which it is good for people to use: La'az for song, Latin for battle, Syriac for lament, Hebrew for speech. And some say also: Assyrian for writing."

(*Jerusalem Talmud - Megilla Scroll* 51:2)

consuming methods, were set up. The term "ulpan", a modern Hebrew coinage based on the talmudic term for "study", no longer requires explanation, so that evening classes the world over, from the USA to the USSR, from France to Mexico, from South America to South Africa, are called ulpanim. Indeed, the Israeli ulpan serves as a model for adult language classes in other countries. An amusing illustration of this is the story of a recent visit to Israel of a group of teachers from Wales who expressed their amazement that we Israelis also call our adult Hebrew language classes "ulpan"!

The establishment of the State of Israel had tremendous impact on the growth of Hebrew language classes for adults in Israel and in the Diaspora. It would be wrong, however, to give the impression that before this Hebrew was not taught, or that prior to the establishment of the state, no efforts were made to investigate new methods and approaches in order to improve teaching techniques. The history of Hebrew teaching for adults is marked by a series of attempts designed to accelerate the pace of teaching and improve the variety of material, while at the same time searching for ways of simplifying the teaching of grammar in order to maintain the pupils' interest. Regrettably there is very little on record of these early attempts.

The following example is a piquant illustration* relating to the noted Eretz Israel labour leader, Yosef Chaim Brenner (1881–1921):

"The men asked Brenner to teach them Hebrew as well. After a couple of lessons he felt disheartened. All his efforts were wasted. They just could not grasp the language. Abrashka (Hassin) told him: 'Brenner, it won't work like this.' 'What should we do?' asked Brenner. 'I have a suggestion,' replied Abrashka. 'Write a spicy pornographic poem in Hebrew. When we learn the words, it will be a good start.' Brenner was shocked: Hebrew pornography? Later he reflected, 'Why not?' – and felt that for the sake of this noble ideal he should not refuse. The poem that he wrote was well spiced ... (if only we could lay our hands on it today!)... and the lads found a suitable Russian melody to go with the words. The following day the stone-masons, stripped to their waists, their sledge-hammers over their shoulders, returned, singing the new song especially written for them

* From a book of memoirs, *Zikhronot u'phirkey haim* by M. Chadash, quoted in the literary magazine, *Iton 77*, May, 1985.

by Brenner, with gusto. Thus several dozen first Hebrew words were absorbed by them. What pedagogy could not do, pornography achieved!"

Another instance of trial and error is reflected in an anecdote related at a language teachers' conferences dealing with the teaching of a second language: Immediately after Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, the American armed forces decided to teach Japanese to a group of officers about to embark for the Japanese front. With this object in view, some thirty officers joined a five-week intensive crash-course. At the conclusion of the course, the officers were given a test and it transpired that they knew quite a lot about Japanese language and literature, but none was able to ask for a glass of water in Japanese, or ask for directions. The officers were then isolated for another five weeks with native Japanese speakers, at the conclusion of which period they began speaking the language.

Over the years, a system has evolved, based on the lesson of this anecdote. Whether it is authentic or not, it illustrates the efforts being made to make the teaching of a second language fast, and effective.

Following the establishment of the state, ulpan methods successfully tested and proven in Israel were increasingly adapted for courses abroad, and a dramatic change occurred both in the number of students and in the time required for the student to attain standards encouraging continuity. Adults realised that they no longer required years to master the seven main conjugation types of paradigms of the Hebrew verb, since simple conversational Hebrew could be mastered within a few weeks of well-programmed studies. It was realized that by adopting a sequence of priorities: Understanding – Speech – Reading –Writing; after no more than thirty lessons, students with an active vocabulary of some 500 words could conduct a simple Hebrew conversation.

The teaching of Hebrew to adults the world over is conducted through two main avenues; first, ulpan study centres and Hebrew language courses in community centres, synagogues, schools, etc. Secondly, universities, colleges and teachers' seminaries.

In 1958 – to mark the tenth anniversary of the State of Israel – six senior Hebrew language instructors were dispatched to the USA and

Canada. Their mission was to awaken the interest of potential students, to encourage existing institutions to demonstrate the new methods developed in Israel's ulpanim and to establish crash courses for Hebrew teachers where these methods could be followed. At the same time, they were to organize workshops for a young task force composed not only of local teachers but also of Israeli students, spouses of members of the diplomatic corps and other Israeli emissaries. This core group would then teach small groups attached to synagogues, youth movements and other Jewish institutions.

The experiment was a success and was soon followed by the need for a permanent centre to which teachers could turn for advice, to observe and learn from those more experienced, and which could also provide personnel for remote places. Thus the first ulpan centre with 300 students was established in the World Zionist Organization's premises in New York. Today the centre, with its branches and an annual enrolment of over 1,800 students, serves as a prototype for other centres in America, in Europe and elsewhere.

The WZO Hebrew Language Division of the Department of Education and Culture in the Diaspora is charged with the continuity and encouragement of Hebrew classes for adults the world over, and conducts similar ulpan centres, for example in Paris and environs with 1,500 students, Buenos Aires with 800, and many others with between 200–300 pupils each. Most classes are held twice weekly in the evenings, each session lasting two hours, although there are many morning courses, mainly designed for women and retirees.

These ulpan centres conduct regular refresher courses and brief, intensive workshops for teachers, as well as for those training to be teachers of adults. The centres also test and evaluate all new teaching methods and materials. Some five parallel study programmes, divided into four levels, are available to students. Each level consists of some 60 hours of study, at the end of which students interested are prepared for the Jerusalem Examination. (The holder of a Jerusalem Examination Certificate is exempt from the Hebrew proficiency entrance examinations required by all universities in Israel, or from attending a Hebrew preparatory course – obligatory for overseas students.) Surveys conducted by the Hebrew Language Division show that each year some 18,000 students attend about 1,200 classes taught by approximately 800 teachers the world over.

One of the main obstacles encountered by an adult attempting to

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Detail from poster: the Hebrew letter "Chet"

study a new language – the culture barrier – tends not to apply to Hebrew ulpanim, since the majority but by no means all of its students are Jews. For many reasons – religious, cultural and national – Hebrew can be considered as indispensable to anyone, but especially Jews, who are deeply concerned with the fate of Judaism, Jewry and Israel.

In a sample poll (500 questionnaires) conducted by the Ulpan Centre in New York, replies to the question "Why Do You Study Hebrew?" were as follows:

63% I hope to visit Israel soon and/or settle there;
17% I want to understand my (Jewish) heritage better;
10% I am a student of a department of Semitic languages or theology, and the study of Hebrew will assist me in my studies;
5% In order to help my children with their homework;
4% Because I have Israeli friends;
1% Various (Among them an Irish bus-driver who wanted to learn Hebrew – the language of his Jewish neighbours – "a nice old couple from the old country", in order to surprise them. It later transpired that they spoke Yiddish.)

Apart from Hebrew ulpan courses, lessons in Hebrew are available on radio and television, "The Hebrew Corner" in Jewish newspapers and magazines, cassettes and records of Hebrew lessons self-taught. For children and young adults, Hebrew summer camps both in Israel and the Diaspora offer a variety of opportunities and conditions to suit all those interested in learning Hebrew. Furthermore, the Council for the Teaching of Hebrew endeavours to centralize all information in the field of Hebrew studies in Israel and abroad, and to make this information available to the public.

Inasmuch as Hebrew studies in universities and colleges is concerned, there is evidence of such studies in Europe as early as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and from the seventeenth century in America where a Hebrew dissertation was a prerequisite for the baccalaureate degree. Of the six linguistic theses written by the first graduation class of Harvard University, three were in Hebrew. Traces still remain of the importance accorded to the Hebrew language in American history, for example, the Hebrew mottos on

the seals of leading universities such as Yale and Columbia.

In a survey prepared by the Council for the Teaching of Hebrew, over 450 institutes of higher learning the world over offered classical and/or modern Hebrew lessons in centres as disparate as Warsaw, Jos (Nigeria), Tokyo and Buenos Aires. Most of these institutions are in close contact with the Council which offers assistance in various fields: for example, exchange of teaching materials, staffing of vacant posts, specialization for students/lecturers and workshops. Within the framework of the cultural treaty between Israel and France, for instance, candidates are screened and prepared by the Council for three-year posts as lecturers in Hebrew in ten French universities.

In teachers' and rabbinic seminaries a new generation of students is emerging for whom Hebrew has become a parallel language to their mother tongue. All this is due to the introduction of new methods, the appointment of qualified teachers and the facilities offered to students enabling them to attend summer courses or even a year of study in Israel. Today there is hardly a major university in the world which does not have a modern Hebrew department, or offer courses leading to a first or second degree in the language.

The Council for the Teaching of Hebrew, in cooperation with the International Centre for University Teaching of Jewish Civilization (under the auspices of the President of Israel), arranges summer workshops for lecturers and professors of Hebrew language and literature, where specific problems of teaching Hebrew in academic institutions are discussed.

The study of Hebrew as a second language attained world-wide academic status in 1973 with the holding, in Jerusalem, of the first conference on problems of teaching modern Hebrew at universities, as part of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies. This has since been held every four years as an extension of the World Congress. The unit offers a four-day intensive programme of lectures, workshops and symposia, and is attended by professors, lecturers, and teachers from all over the world. This assembly has become the world centre for the exchange of ideas, information, teaching methods and aids, all towards updating the study of modern Hebrew.

Teaching Hebrew to adults has, from its inception, been a movement, a kind of task force, with a clear mission – to teach Jews their

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language. That it succeeded was due not only to the devotion and ingenuity of its teachers, but also to the smouldering of latent embers burning within the Jewish people, wherever the place of their dispersion, which kept alive a desire to re-discover the sources of their tradition, their culture, and their homeland. In different places, at different periods, it needed only a breath of wind to turn the embers to flame. The Jews of Russia today afford a striking example. Their desire to return to the tradition of their people and their country first took concrete form in the Hebrew language ulpanim which they organized clandestinely, in private homes. This was the first step.

Language is a window to the culture of a people. The rapid developments in the teaching of Hebrew, both geographically and pedagogically, have had far-reaching repercussions on the life of the Jewish people. Hebrew, the Tongue of the Prophets, has truly become a language of today, transcending the boundaries of time and space, with Jerusalem as its epicentre.

הוי אריאל אריאל קריית חנן דוד

Ho, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David encamped (Isaiah 29,1)

אריאל ariel

A Review of Arts
and Letters in Israel

Jerusalem / Number 69 / 1987